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U.S. Post Office and Court House
(Lynchburg City Hall)
900 Church Street
Lynchburg (Independent City)
Virginia

HABS No. VA-38

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

U.S. POST OFFICE AND COURT HOUSE
(Lynchburg City Hall)

HABS No. VA-38

Original Name: U.S. Post Office and Court House

Present Name: Lynchburg City Hall

Location: 900 Church Street, Lynchburg (Independent City), Virginia, northeast
side of Church Street, facing Church Street, between Ninth
and Tenth Streets

Present Owner: City of Lynchburg

Present Occupant: Undergoing renovation, to be occupied by municipal government
in January 1982

Present Use: In transition

Significance: The building is an example of the neoclassic architectural style
popular for Federal buildings in the 1930s

Note: During 1981, the City of Lynchburg is in a transitional phase as the current renovation will enable the move of the municipal government into a new City Hall; therefore, two buildings are being entered--the new city hall (VA-38) and the present City Hall (VA-1206)--due to the significance of the architectural, historical, and physical relationship between the two buildings.

The present city hall, which will remain a part of the municipal complex, and the new city hall were both once United States Post Office buildings. The present city hall was Lynchburg's second post office; it was converted into a city hall in 1934 when the city's third post office appeared across the street.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Construction began on June 30, 1932, with an appropriation of \$840,000, and the building was completed in November, 1933, according to Chambers. (Attached news clipping of October 12, 1936, states that construction began late in 1931.)
2. Architect: Preliminary designs were done by Stanhope Johnson, a well-known architect of extreme importance in Lynchburg's development. Working drawings are signed by James Alonzo Wetmore who was the supervising architect of the Treasury from 1915 to 1933. Chambers, in Lynchburg: An Architectural History, reviews Wetmore's career, noting that his degree was in law (1896). From a clerk's position in the Treasury's Law and Records Division in 1893, he became chief of the division in 1896 and executive officer in 1911. Wetmore then took over additional duties during the illness of Oscar Wenderoth, the supervising architect, and became acting supervising architect upon Wenderoth's retirement. An interesting point which Chambers quotes from Architectural Forum is that "...although neither an architect nor an engineer, Mr. Wetmore's name, because of the period of intensive building activity which followed his appointment, appears on the cornerstone of more buildings than any other man's in history."

The original, signed plans were used extensively by the architects in designing the renovation currently underway.

3. Builder, contractor, suppliers: The general contractor for the Indiana sandstone structure was Ralph Sollitt & Sons of South Bend, Indiana. F. L. Showalter Inc. of Lynchburg was the subcontractor for the concrete work. Mr. Showalter, now 88 years of age, remains an important figure today in Lynchburg's construction business. He remembers that he was "happy to get that job. It was the only job of any consequence going on in Lynchburg that year." He noted that the Depression made materials readily available and that the lumber to build the forms for pouring concrete cost \$13 per thousand. He also remembers that labor was easy to come by: "The best construction men in Lynchburg were standing there every morning looking for work."
4. Original plans and construction: The full set of original plans is located in the city engineer's office.
5. Alterations and additions: Major alterations and additions were begun in August 1980, with a projected completion date of 450 days. At this writing, completion is scheduled for late 1981. Frazier Construction Company of Altavista, Virginia, was contracted by the city for the renovation at an approximate total cost of \$4.4 million. Architects for the renovation are Fauber Garbee, Inc. of Forest, Virginia, with Robert Garbee as supervising architect. The interior design incorporates the newest concepts of functionalism, with the most frequented offices and council chambers on the main floor. On the second floor are offices such as planning, inspections and zoning, while the administrative offices are located on the third floor. On the lower level are the three offices which are most likely to be open at night: the Branch Library, Registrar of Voters and the Cable Television studio, along with the entrance for the handicapped.

The renovation preserves the exterior as is, with the exception of an addition which provides for 30,000 square feet through extension of the second and third floors at the rear of the building. (Contemporary photographs and descriptions are attached.)

The original interior marble and terra cotta have been removed in the total modernization for functional use of the building. The original copper-framed storm vestibule at the main entrance to the building is being retained. The ornamental bronze grills, originally used as radiator covers, are being reused as a handrail surrounding the most unique and contemporary feature of the renovation: the atrium, an opening cut between floors to provide a dramatic spatial effect. From the atrium, visitors to the City Hall lobby will be able to view the Branch Library on the lower level. Installation of totally new mechanical and electrical systems makes use of advanced technology. Secondary glazing is being installed inside the original windows to preserve the original appearance and provide high quality sound and heat insulation.

B. Historical Context:

The structure was occupied as a U. S. Post Office and Court House, housing federal courts and offices, from its completion in 1933 until August 1980. It was purchased from the U. S. Government by the City of Lynchburg in late 1978 and leased for use as a federal building until renovation began in August, 1980. As of January 1982, the renovated structure will house the major administrative portion of the city government.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Description of Exterior:

Stanhope Johnson's preliminary drawings indicate a Corinthian Order; however, James A. Wetmore's working drawings show an Ionic Order and slight differences. Chambers, again in Lynchburg: An Architectural History, states:

The first floor is rusticated, while the smooth-faced second and third stories are highlighted by Ionic pilasters separating the bays of the facade. The projecting center section consists of thirteen of these bays. On either side is a recessed end bay. Above, the entablature is topped by a parapet, divided into alternating solid and balustered sections corresponding to the pilasters and finestrations below. Elements and proportions are correct and tasteful -- and altogether weak. Projections are so slight and moldings so thin that all the vigor of the building's classic heritage seems to have been dissipated.

Built of Indiana sandstone around a steel and reinforced concrete frame, the U-shaped building is three floors high with a basement and topped by a large open storage attic. Of Neoclassic style, described by Chambers as "restrained," the building's features are readily apparent in photographs (attached.) Original brick bonds specified in the plans included American, English, English Cross Bond, Flemish, Garden Wall and Garden Wall Cross Bond.

B. Description of Interior:

The original interior included cherry wainscoting, marble wall coverings and terra cotta floors throughout. Thresholds were of cement, wood, marble and cast iron. Other materials included bronze and brass ornamental trim and cast iron, wrought iron and steel.

The current renovation, as noted previously, provides for a complete modernization of the interior with the finished product to include carpeted floors, vinyl-covered walls, wood and metal doors and the glassed-in atrium.

Mechanical systems are being completely replaced to include gas heat.

C. Site:

The building faces southwest, sits in the heart of the downtown central business district and is surrounded by Ninth Street, Church Street, Tenth Street and stores fronting on Main Street.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Architectural Drawings: Architectural drawings dated 1931 and 1932 and architectural drawings for the 1980-1981 renovation are located in the city engineer's office.
- B. Early Views: An artist's rendering of the proposed building hangs in the city engineer's office in the present City Hall; the oil painting, of unknown origin, depicts a building of similar style and size, quite obviously on the same location. The artist's signature on the undated painting is illegible and not recognizable among artists of the period.
- C. Bibliography:
 - 1. Primary sources:
 - a. Copies of contemporary news clippings
 - b. Copies of current City Council minutes
 - 2. Secondary sources:
 - a. Chambers, Allen, Lynchburg: An Architectural History, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, Va., at press 1981.
- D. Likely sources not yet investigated
 - Deed books of 1930's
 - City council minutes of 1930's
 - Material in collection of Jones Memorial Library, Lynchburg, Va.
- E. Supplemental Material:
 - Copies of contemporary news clippings covering purchase and renovation of building
 - Copies of current City Council minutes covering architectural, engineering and construction related to renovation